Challenges of Governing Democratic Regimes:
Public Administration as Counterweight to Populism, Partisanship, and Rent-Seeking

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Abstract

In the study of public administration little attention is given to the big question of citizen understanding of the position and role of government in contemporary society. This is especially important in and to democracies since that is the only political institutional arrangement where all people in their role as citizens have voice. That potential of participation and expression makes democracies particularly vulnerable to public opinion and mood swings on the one hand and to manipulative abuse on the other. The first is perhaps best captured in the declining trust in governments of democratic systems since the 1970s and has been well-documented. The second can be illustrated in various ways, such as political populism and partisanship that “plays” more on emotions than on substantive policy and rent-seeking behavior on the part of private corporations and elected officials. The focus of this paper is the second issue, the manipulative abuse of democracy. What can scholars in the study of public administration contribute to counter trends of populism, partisanship and rent-seeking and make for a revitalization of democratic government?

Keywords: citizens, civic education, challenges to governing in democracy, the study of public administration
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Education has two purposes: on the one hand to form the mind, on the other to train the citizen. The Athenians concentrated on the former, the Spartans on the latter. The Spartans won, but the Athenians were remembered.” (Russell 1962 [1931], 243)

Government should not be run like a business, it should be run like a democracy. (Denhardt and Denhardt 2007, 3)

…government began as a mafia protection racket claiming a monopoly on violence and extracting a rent (tax) in return for protecting its citizens from depredation by outsiders. (Ridley 2015, 239)

Public administration is a field of study that not only teaches current and future public and nonprofit professionals all sorts of skills and techniques such as program evaluation, cost-benefit analysis, hiring and firing processes, use of electronic media, statistical analyses, fishbone diagrams, logic models, etc., but also educates public and nonprofit officials, private sector professionals and citizens in how we can think about government. We have become very good at training for skills and techniques, but should play a bigger role in educating citizens for understanding the position and role of government in democratic political systems.
Government faces many challenges and those include challenges in processes, personnel, and functions internal to public sector organizations (e.g., streamlining bureaucratic processes, modernizing personnel functions, improving accountability, etc.) as well as services, tasks, policies, and functions that benefit the public at large. All these are important, but no matter how much public officials manage to improve responses to various internal and external challenges, it is to no avail when the citizenry does not have a basic understanding of the position and role of government in society.

Government in society is a concept that underlines how government in democratic political systems serves society, exists by the grace of society, is legitimized by citizens, and is an indispensable feature of and in imagined communities of people. Hence, the biggest challenge is not understanding government as such but democratic government in its various interactions with society.

This is a big challenge since trust in government has been steadily declining in democratic countries since the 1970s. There may be various reasons for this, but one of them is certainly that citizens are less informed today because of a decline in civic education at large in the past fifty years. It used to be considered sufficient to offer understanding of government via curricular elements in elementary and secondary education about the “stamps, flags, and coins” of government, such as modules on the three branches of government, on how a bill becomes a law, on levels of government, and on the political process broadly defined. This approach to civic education has had its day, but has neither been augmented nor replaced by a more holistic approach to understanding government-in-society. To be sure, we still need citizens to be informed about the “stamps, flags and coins” of government, i.e., its basic organizational structure and policy functions, but we also need them to be informed about, among other things:
- the indispensable role of bureaucracy in a democracy,
- the interplay of elected, politically appointed, and career civil servant officeholders,
- similarities and differences between public, nonprofit and private sector stakeholders,
- the interplay between public, nonprofit and private sector stakeholders,
- contrasts between stereotypes and reality of government,
- stereotypes that elected officeholders, career civil servants, and citizens have of each other,
- government as the only actor that has the authority to make binding decisions on behalf of all in a country,
- citizen participation as being more than simply voting, attending council meetings, or serving in citizen committees (usually at the local level), and
- citizen rights and citizen duties in a democracy (including understanding the impact of social cleavages, i.e., the duty to treat one another as equals).

To understand the contemporary collective challenges that people face in the regional, national, inter-regional and global communities, and to gauge the position and role of government in tackling these challenges, it is necessary to consider the very ancient instinctual and behavioral predispositions of human beings in relation to the institutional arrangements for the distribution of power and wealth that people establish and accept when living under sedentary conditions. In this paper I will first touch upon the nature of democracy as it emerged in the past two centuries or so (section one), and briefly discuss this declining trust in government (section two). Next, and not pretending to be exhaustive, I proceed to highlight three reasons why democratic government is so vulnerable. First, it is sensitive to the kind of visceral opinionating that comes with instinctual and emotional rather than thoughtful responses to public action and initiative (section three). When this emotional stance is embraced by those in politics,
second, democratic government becomes susceptible to destructive partisanship (section four).
Third, it is endangered by manipulation that is inspired by survival instinct parading as greed for
possession and lust for power (section five). Perhaps it is naïve, but the deep and persistent
whispers of instinct, emotions, and manipulation beneath the veneer of civilization can be
restrained on the basis of a civic education program (section six) that seeks to provide
understanding of the necessary interplay of democracy and bureaucracy (section seven) and
educates citizens about being gardeners of democracy (section eight).

1. Democracy as Ideal(-Type) Political System

In many societies around the globe the state is still treated as a property and instrument of the
elites, and bureaucracy is the instrument that helps keeping the top political and economic
leaders into power by assuring that those working in bureaucracy can cream off part of the pie.
That is the type of political-administrative and economic system that dominates all historical
societies, and has prompted libertarians such as Nock and Ridley to portray government as just
another crime syndicate. English libertarian journalist and House of Lords member Matt
Viscount Ridley opines that all governments start out as a criminal racket (see epigraph) and that
in democracies they do not shed their interventionist and designer (i.e., social engineering)
inclinations. In fact, during World War Two and the decades following, Ridley suggests that the
‘command-and-control state’ reaches its culmination (2015, 252). The same sentiment can be
found in an opinion piece by the American libertarian Albert Nock who writes that

… the State’s criminality is nothing new and nothing to be wondered at. It began
when the first predatory group of men clustered together and formed the State,
and it will continue as long as the State exists in the world, because the State is fundamentally an anti-social institution, fundamentally criminal. The idea that the State originated to serve any kind of social purpose is completely unhistorical. (Nock 1939, 345)

One can argue with Nock’s phrasing, but, historically, the state and its government had been the instrument of those with political and economic power, and libertarians such as Nock and Ridley perceive the unprecedented expansion of government services and policies since the late nineteenth century as an infringement of the inalienable right to freedom. But, is the idea that state and government also serve a social purpose so unhistorical? In Antiquity, imperial governments (e.g. Egypt, Rome) organized food storage for times of famine. Since the late Middle Ages in Europe, local governments increasingly provided basic services for orphans, the sick and the elderly. The idea to offer such social services state-wide is advocated by the Italian political economist Giambattista Vico in the early eighteenth century, and he is followed by scholars such as Christiaan von Wolff (mid-eighteenth century), Adam Smith and Condorcet (both late eighteenth century).

At the time of the Atlantic Revolutions the ancient idea of equality of people, perhaps first so conceived by Zeno of Elea in the fifth century BCE and reiterated by St. Paul in his second letter to the Galatians, becomes enshrined in an equality before the law and in a new set of institutional arrangements for governing (Raadschelders 2015, 21-24). It is since then that the equally ancient idea of democracy is elevated from including only part of the population in a small territorial unit, the adult males in the city state of Athens, to the large unit of the territorial state that is inclusive of all who live within its boundaries even when only those who are defined
as citizens have voting rights. It is upon the foundation for such a new, i.e. much less predatory, type of institutional arrangement that governments in Western countries since the late nineteenth century were able to respond to the demand for more public services generated by the social challenges posed by the ‘triple whammy’ of industrialization, urbanization and rapid population growth (Raadschelders and Vigoda-Gadot 2015, 39, 65).

Democracy has been spreading across the globe but it has one big hurdle to overcome: the almost instinctual inclination of the individual to survive and to do so by acquiring material goods without regard for others and, if necessary, manipulate societies’ rules to do so “legally.” The individual in primate societies can cheat and deceive, as primatologists have shown. The human individual is just as capable of cheating and deceiving but probably less so in physical than in imagined communities. Furthermore, one can imagine that manipulation is “easier” or more “understandable” and “fitting” in Western democratic polities with their emphasis upon the individual as the building block of society. This Western worldview of the individual as the center of the universe influences Westerners’ outlook on politics and economics. Perhaps it is idealistic or naïve to believe in, but humanity now has not only the ability to recognize the great advantages of democracy as the best of institutional arrangements for constraining individual instinctual and tribal behaviors, but actually also has the ability to understand it. Churchill’s reminder of someone’s remark as that democracy is the best of all bad governing arrangements is tongue-in-cheek, because he understands perfectly what democracy stands for:

if I had to sum up the immediate future of democratic politics in a single word I should say “insurance.” That is the future – insurance against dangers from abroad, insurance
against dangers scarcely less grave and much more near and constant which threaten us here at home in our own island. (Free Trade Hall, Manchester, May 23, 1909)

Of course, Churchill was a member of the aristocracy and thus of a privileged class, but he describes the secret of democracy very well: it provides insurance against dangers at home and abroad through popular election of representatives on the basis of a secret ballot. In terms of political theory, democracy is so far the best political system humans have developed because it assumes the state and government to be an abstraction that is not a property of a political and economic elite whose machinations cannot be controlled by the populace, but a vessel steered by elected representatives who regard themselves as trustees or guardians of the people and who do not seek power for the sake of power and enrichment. Furthermore, democracy is the political system for the territorial, sovereign state that allows the possibility of self-governing arrangements at local, regional and even national levels. Ideally, democracy is the political system where those in political power serve politics and are not beholden to those with economic power, and, at least, where the possibility of an economic hold over political power is constrained by the rule of law. Also, and again ideally, i.e., under the best of circumstances, democracy is the system where those in power only see it as a temporary honor from which they cannot but voluntary step away. In the modern age it is only George Washington who did so. In fact, George Washington was very modern in his understanding that the democratic institutions of the state are vulnerable to manipulations by people. In his Farewell Address on September 17, 1796, he warned people of political parties:
However political parties may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the
course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and
unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for
themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have
lifted them to unjust dominion.

Washington points out that the democratic republic and state as a set of institutional
arrangements that belongs to the citizenry can be perverted by an individual’s and/or by group
interest in power and/or wealth. It seems that Washington no longer regards the state as a
property in which all governing power should be concentrated as Thomas Hobbes suggested nor
as a property in the hands of absolute rulers against which the people have to be protected as
John Locke advised. And, obviously, Hobbes and Locke both only experienced, and thus thought
about, the state as someone’s property.

2. Declining Trust in Government

The reader recognizes how utopian it sounds to say that democracy is a system of politics where
those in power regard their position as a temporary honor. The reader will note how far removed
this is from reality. It may be the case that “no regime type in the history of mankind has held
such universal and global appeal as democracy does today” (Foa and Mounk 2016, 16), but in
the real world, legal and moral safeguards have been established to protect democracy from
humanity’s more instinctual inclinations. There are electoral cycles so that the citizenry at large
has the opportunity to express desire for a change of direction without having to resort to violent
revolution. In some democracies, it has proven necessary to set term limits so as to assure that
political officeholders cannot stay in power for an unspecified amount of time. Just focusing on political power alone it is clear how much true democracy is still a dream that can be perverted by rent-seeking individuals. Only by contrasting democracy as ideal with democracy as it operates in reality can people see how much is still to be done. And yet, at the same time, that contrast allows us to see that equality of opportunity, if not equality of condition, has been achieved to some degree in the decades immediately following the Second World War. Those three decades were glorious, to use Fourastié’s characterization (1979), with public policies aimed at improving the citizens’ standard of living in general and providing safety nets for those who could not provide for themselves. In those decades trust in national government was high in most Western countries. Whatever happened since the mid-1970s is not the object of this paper to describe, but trust in national public institutions has declined almost everywhere (OECD 2017, 215). Any analysis of this decline in trust should include the fact that the declining trust of the citizenry in national government is prompted by various societal trends of which I pick three: the rise of personality politics and populism, the emergence of a politics of intolerance between political officeholders of different, even opposing, affiliation, and the apparent triumph of rent-seeking behavior by private actors.

3. *Personality Politics and Populism: The Enduring Power of Emotions*

A big challenge to democracy is the political populism made possible through leadership by personality, followership of the herd, and foreign non-democratic governments that seek to flame that populism in the hope of destabilizing democracy. In the words of Wrangham and Peterson,
Whenever political power is personalized, so is the physical power on which it ultimately depends; and whenever the physical power is personalized [not parsed and regulated through institutions, laws, and rules] the violence of demonic males from which it ultimately derives will be unrestrained. (1996, 244)

Personality politics makes democracy vulnerable to the intentions, desires, values, beliefs, tastes, and so on, of those who seek political office and of those who like to stay in political office. Political officeholders have come to recognize the importance of playing upon people’s emotions and their ethnic, racial, and religious biases and thus, as Sennett observes, divorcing the way that they behave themselves in office from their actual performance (2006, 165). Sennett suggests that a politician or a political party can be and are treated as a brand, a marketing tool: “Has the merchandising of political leaders come to resemble that of selling soap, as instantly recognizable brands which the political consumer chooses of the shelf?” (2006, 135) And, political consultants have learned from brain scientists that ideas and programs do not count as much as emotions (Krastev 2012). It is easier to play upon people’s intuitive reactions and emotions than call upon their rationality.

No one can blame political officeholders, political party members, and political consultants, when the apathetic, cynical, education-adverse members of the citizenry simply allow this, and in some cases even lap it up. Being a citizen in a democracy is hard work, because it is not only about rights and following orders and leadership, it is also about duties and taking co-responsibility for what happens in the public realm. This is, however, difficult in a time that the solidarity of social capitalism has given way to a politics of new individualism and indifference (Sennett 2006, 164). Why would one care about someone else’s fate and fortune
when it is hard enough to look after one’s own? Is the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev right when somewhat cynically observing that “Transparency is not about restoring trust in institutions. Transparency is politics’ management of mistrust.” (2012)?

The experiment in democracy is also under pressure from political regimes that fear the potential of democracy and thus seek to destabilize democratic regimes through playing upon the ancient human inclination of distinguishing between in-group and out-group. I am not familiar with any empirical evidence that non-democratic regimes do this, but it has been suggested in various media outlets that, for instance, Russia seeks to destabilize Western European countries. First, as mentioned in a New York Times article of May 29, 2017, through financing right-wing populist parties such as the Five Star Movement in Italy, the Front National in France, the AFD in Germany, and the Party of Freedom in the Netherlands. These parties thrive, because, second, Russia allegedly also directs migrants from Asian and Middle-Eastern countries to Western Europe, thus feeding a nationalist frenzy against increasing multi-ethnicity in society. Third, late 2017 it was suggested that Russia may have financed Brexit campaigns in the UK. Who still believes there really is a new human being on the horizon as anthropologist Joseph Henrich suggested (2016)? It is, though, important to keep in mind that political populism is successful in some countries and less so in others (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008).

The question whether humanity is on the verge of becoming a new type of global human species is important. Psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that intuition always seems to come first, and reasoning second (2012, xx and 220). Canadian-American cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker underscores that when listing the features that make it unlikely that human beings will transcend their biological nature and make that leap to global citizenship:
- the primacy of family ties in all human societies and the consequent appeal of nepotism and inheritance;
- the limited scope of communal sharing in groups, the more common ethos of reciprocity, and the resulting phenomenon of social loafing and collapse of contributions to public goods when reciprocity cannot be implemented;
- the universality of dominance and violence across societies and existence of genetic and neurological mechanisms that underlie it;
- the universality of ethnocentrism and other forms of group-against-group hostility across societies, and ease with which such hostility can be aroused;
- the partial heritability of intelligence, conscientiousness, and antisocial tendencies, implying that some degree of inequality will arise even in perfectly fair economic systems, and so we face an inherent tradeoff between equality and freedom;
- the prevalence of defense mechanisms, self-serving biases, cognitive dissonance reduction, by which people deceive themselves about their autonomy, wisdom and integrity; and
- biases of human moral sense, including preference for kin and friends, a susceptibility to a taboo mentality, and a tendency to confuse morality with conformity, rank, cleanliness, and beauty (2002, 294).

This is quite a list, and in this day and age of populism, partisanship and rent-seeking behavior it does seem almost impossible to believe that citizens and their governments can somehow rise above the natural instincts of human beings. Again, we have seen its possibility in those glorious thirty years, but humanity under democratic conditions has suffered some setback since then because of increased polarization and partisanship in the political and societal arenas.
4. *Na-na-na-na-boo-boo Politics: The Price of Polarization and Partisanship*

Living and working in the United States it is easy to think of it as the prime example of a country where politics has become very polarized and partisan. ‘Na-na-na-na-boo-boo politics’ refers to the pettiness of political officeholders once they are in power, to the lack of civility between legislators of different parties, and to the lengths at which both Democrats and Republicans in American politics are prepared to go with manipulating the democratic process wherever they can in order to hold on to power. Redistricting is just one example of the various instruments American politicians have used, and there have been and are various other tools to skew power one way or another (Levitski and Ziblatt 2018, 209-211). However, polarization and partisanship are found in most democratic systems, although in some more (e.g., Southern and Eastern Europe) than in others (Northwestern Europe). And, polarization and partisanship is not only a feature of and generated by political officeholders and those who aspire to political office, but is also found among various groups of citizens. In fact, polarization and partisanship may well be a function of interaction between portions of the population and (aspiring) political officeholders. They feed upon each other’s emotions and prejudices. They focus on selected slices of information rather than scanning the spectrum of news media. People are motivated by loss of identity in an increasingly multi-ethnic world and they are tired of promissory politics and disappointed in the declining shares of economic prosperity and in the declining opportunities for social mobility.

This is not the place to discuss at length the literature on political polarization and partisanship, but some attention for what drives it is useful for understanding the context within which government operates which, in turn, influences perceptions of its position and role in society. First, and focusing on political power only, elite theorists of democracy will argue that
the principal cause of polarization is an ideologically-based leadership style and lack of consensus among the political elite (Körösényi 2013, 16, 18). Related to that is that politics is less and less seen as a calling, and more and more as a way to move up in the food-chain. Another aspect of political discourse is that various pundits, “talking heads,” consultants, and so on, eschew nuanced talk and add to the polarization already existent between political officeholders and their publics.

Second, one can also focus on economic circumstances, and thus find that when promises of welfare policy development do not materialize it results in a rise of economic populism as was the case, for instance, in Hungary in the 1990s (ibid., 14). More generally, and across Western democracies, there is increasing discontent about the rising levels of income inequality and that appears to be quite a robust determinant of polarization (Grechyna 2016).

A third possible set of causes may have to do with civil rights. The higher the extent to which freedom of expression (e.g., a free press) and freedom of association (e.g., labor unions) are allowed, the lower the degree of political polarization (Patkós 2016). The structure of the political element in the system of political-administrative institutional arrangements represents a fourth category of causes. It is found that in a majoritarian, two-party system levels of political polarization and partisanship are generally higher. Politics and policy making in multi-party, consensus democracies is not just “kinder and gentler,” as Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart observed (1999, 306-307), it is simply less polarizing.

A fifth reason for political polarization and partisanship may be generational, since it is found that it is highest among those who are least likely to use Internet and communicate via social media, that is, the elderly (Boxell et al. 2017, 5). Finally, a sixth possible cause may actually underlie all others and that has to do with levels of trust between people as human
beings in general and between people in their respective roles of citizens, career civil servants, and political officeholders. At the very least, lack of trust among people also appears as a very robust determinant of polarization (Grechyna 2016). And it does not help at all that people increasingly distrust sources of information as well. How profoundly sad is it that children and teenagers need to be taught how to distinguish fake news from “real” news, such as financed by Microsoft for secondary school education in Italy. The price paid for political polarization and partisanship is declining belief in the possibility of democracy.

Indeed, democracy may have more universal appeal than any other regime type in history, but the fact that even in democracies support for authoritarian alternatives is rising (Foa and Mounk 2016, 12; Levistki and Ziblatt 2018) must be cause for concern, and certainly should warn anyone not to be complacent about the future of democracy. Let us not forget that democracy is not just a set of institutional arrangements, but also a behavioral habit of self-restraint. In the words of President Benjamin Harrison: “God has never endowed any statement or philosopher, or any body of them, with wisdom enough to frame a system of government that everybody could go off and leave.” (1895, 4)

A more visible and tangible illustration of the price of political polarization and partisanship is that citizens, career civil servants and political officeholders perceive each other sooner on the basis of stereotypes than upon an effort to carefully discern what the reality actually might be like. Talking in the course of my career to lower, middle and upper level career civil servants, elected officeholders at local, regional and national levels, students in grades 7 to 12 and higher education, and people in general it is clear that people perceive reality more in terms of stereotypes about each other than is desirable. Take a look at tables 1, 2 and 3 below (based on and expanded from Raadschelders 2003, 220-222).
Table 1 Stereotypes about and Reality of Citizens

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotypes</th>
<th>Concrete: the Citizen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract: the Citizenry</td>
<td>Uninformed; entitlement mentality; uninterested; lack of civic duty and emphasis on civil rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting cattle; public policy too difficult to understand for lay people</td>
<td>Uninformed; entitlement mentality; uninterested; lack of civic duty and emphasis on civil rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>Active in interest groups; involved in public affairs relevant to personal life; emphasis on rights and duties;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited knowledge about government</td>
<td>Active in interest groups; involved in public affairs relevant to personal life; emphasis on rights and duties;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Political polarization and partisanship may well result in citizen apathy, which is not quite similar to the stereotypes I have heard float about citizens. Apathy is where citizens simply give up in the belief that their voices and votes no longer matter. However, it is important for citizens to remember that politician- and bureaucrat-bashing on their part is short-sighted, since those who do not recognize their duty as citizens are just as guilty of perpetuating the existing stereotypical misunderstandings. This cannot be emphasized enough: in the long stretch of history it is most unusual to have the opportunity to be a citizen rather than a subject. And that comes with duties, not just rights.

Table 2 Stereotypes and Reality about Politics and Elected Officials

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotypes</th>
<th>Concrete: politicians as individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract: politics as actor</td>
<td>Lust for power; corruptible; manipulative; political office as means to power and wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term vision; “promissory politics”; sound-bites without substance, talking without saying much; manipulative</td>
<td>Lust for power; corruptible; manipulative; political office as means to power and wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality</td>
<td>Representatives of specific electoral interests; visionaries for change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Represents the common interest; politics as calling</td>
<td>Representatives of specific electoral interests; visionaries for change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elected officeholders (and those aspiring to political office) have taken up the habit of bureaucrat-bashing since the late 1970s and have been quite successful as judged by the extent to which citizens distrust bureaucracy. However, let us not forget that political officeholders can just as easily be stereotyped (table 2). I did so in my TEDx-talk on reconceptualizing government (cf. “politicians have learned to kiss babies, civil servants daily change the diapers”) (Raadschelders 2018). To be sure, I do not believe that all politicians are self-serving, rent-seeking individuals, but it is necessary to provide some counterweight to bureaucrat-bashing. And it is important to remember that politics should be about substance, not just about personality, intuition and gut reactions.

Table 3 Perception about and Reality of Career Civil Servants and Government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotypes</th>
<th>Abstract: government as a whole</th>
<th>Concrete: government as subunits (including individuals)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stereotypes</strong></td>
<td>bureaucracy is too big; inaccessible; inefficient; red tape; corruptible.</td>
<td>bureaucrats are self-seeking; formalistic; distant; corruptible; power hungry; slavishly following the lead of elected office-holders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reality</strong></td>
<td>balancing myriad and conflicting demands; largest single employer; largest possible clientele; huge degree of organizational differentiation</td>
<td>pro-active policy makers; citizen-oriented; concerned; professional; indispensable to politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The stereotypes we are most familiar with are those about government and career civil servants (a term I prefer by far over the much more pejorative “bureaucrats”) and the reader can find those in table 3. Some of the items mentioned in the bottom row of each of these three tables will come across as idealistic, but I cannot help thinking that democracy is possible and need not nor should be left as responsibility of the political leadership only (cf. Mackie 2009 on Schumpeter’s
elitist views on democracy). Democracy and its government is the responsibility of all people in their respective public roles.

5. Rent-Seeking Behavior by Private Actors: Business Principles in the Public Realm

To understand the vulnerability of democracy and democratic politics we also need to consider the extent to which economic thought not only has become intertwined with political thought and perspective but has actually come to dominate politics. The contemporary study of economics emerges out of Europe’s Enlightenment as the study of rent-seeking individuals who maximize their preferences, i.e., the study of micro-economics, and where government policies allegedly seek to advance the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals. In that utilitarian approach to economics, scholars quickly forget the study’s early-modern roots as the study of political economy (Reinert 2007), that is, the study of how and why politics controls the economy, i.e., the study of macro-economics. Scholars such as the Italian economist avant-la-lettre Antonio Serra in the early seventeenth century, and the Prussian statesman and scholar of public administration Veit Ludwig von Seckendorff in the middle of the seventeenth century observe that social development is best achieved through

(a) diversifying the economy and not focus on the production of raw materials only, through …
(b) … government initiated (and likely financed) development of connective and energy infrastructure (in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: paved roads, canals; in the second half of the nineteenth century: railroads, water~, gas~ and electricity lines, sewers; in the late twentieth, the world wide web), as well as through …
(c) … education accessible for and to the population at large, and doing a-c by …
(d) … linking the economically thriving urban with the more traditional rural, agricultural communities (Reinert 2007, 92, 95, 225), which includes nowadays linking the developed to the lesser developed parts of the world. So, we can and should be able to probe what governing as a social phenomenon and institutional arrangement is, and then seek understanding of its three main manifestations:

1. self-government among people, which lasted some 4000 years,
2. government above a society with subjects, which lasted almost 6000 years, and
3. government in a society with citizens, which represents a position and role that emerged at the time of the Atlantic Revolutions and to which citizens and governments are still adjusting. And in parts of the world, we should add since the twentieth century …

(e) … providing accessible health care to the population at large, and

(f) high (marginal) levels of direct taxation.

This recipe (a-f) for economic and social development seems to be standard operating procedure in Northwestern European countries since the Second World War and is suggested for the United States by, among others, the American legal scholar and political officeholder Robert Reich (2015), Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz (2013, 2016), and economic advisor Jeffrey Sachs (2011). It is also advanced as the recipe for improving the plight of developing countries by, for instance, John Williamson in his proposal of the Washington Consensus. To be sure, he never intended for his ideas to be interpreted in the narrow confines of monetarism, supply-side economics, and minimal state (Williamson 1989, 2002). The voices of Reich, Sachs, Stiglitz, Williamson and many others, however, are drowned out by that ancient drive for physical survival and for dominance (including recognition, prestige, etc.) that seems to lead to a get-what-you-want/need attitude among human beings living in sedentary and imagined
communities, even among those who live in the so-called Western world with its democratic political systems. More specifically, to think of the public sector as ‘government’ and of the private sector as the ‘market’ is Western of origin.

How do people today perceive the relation between the public arena, as “embodied” in an abstract government, and the private arena, as usually identified in the concept of “market”? For most of history the market is literally a place, a square, where producers such as farmers come to sell and city-folk consumers gather to buy. That “market” is a physical place for the exchange of commodities, and these can still be seen and experienced in the various daily markets in the developing world, the kasbah’s in the Middle East and northern Africa, the weekly markets in Europe, and the farmer’s markets in the United States.

Government belongs to the public world and government’s primacy over private interests is nicely captured in Roman jurist Aemilius Papinianus’ (142-212 CE) dictum of “a public right cannot be changed by the agreements of private parties” (ius publicum privatorum pactis mutari non potest) that is the basis of the Western understanding of the rule of law (Hamza 2017, 192; Novak 2009, 25). One can argue whether this idea provides a glimpse into what happens in the eighteenth century, namely that people come to think of “market” as an abstraction, as something where the business interests of the private realm are somehow, magically, propelled by an invisible hand. The concept of the market’s “invisible hand” is coined by the Scottish political economist Adam Smith who warns that private entrepreneurs and business interests can become “tribes of monopoly” whose sole function is to secure wealth by first working for it and, next, by securing property, such as land or buildings, that others are wanting to rent through, among other things, the manipulation of legislators (2010, 132, 230, 239). Hence, the concept of rent-seeking which refers to activity where one accumulates wealth without having to work for it.
Given the global reach of large corporations, there is every reason that governments should pay careful attention to protecting democracy. I do not know whether comparative research has been done into the extent that private business in various countries try to influence and bend public policy and regulation to fit their interests, but it is clear that this has happened since the 1970s. It is certainly the case in the United States where public policy and decision making have been increasingly captured by private corporations through, inter alia, supporting re-election campaigns of business-friendly candidates and officeholders. This is not just regulatory capture (Stiglitz 2013, 59), it is corrosive capture (Hacker and Pierson 2016, 93) since it hacks away at the roots of a democracy where the differences between haves and have-nots not so much disappear but are ameliorated by some degree of redistributive policy.

As much as libertarians like the idea of a free market, a true free market would be akin to the anarchy that Hobbes feared. In fact, the free market in a democracy can only be one that is regulated by government (Polanyi 1944, 71, 141) so as to avoid excesses of price gauging and usury, of rent-seeking, and of unsavory competitive practices. A true free market with unbridled capitalism emasculates political democracy (Mann 2013, 132) because it violates the rights of the little man that Churchill spoke off. In the concluding volume of his study on origins of social power, sociologist Michael Mann observes that the golden age of capitalism, the 1930s to the early 1970s, was a regulated one (2013, 136). Indeed, democratic polities cannot afford an unregulated market (Reich 2015, 4) and the superorganism that multinational corporations have become can only be contained by government (Haidt 2012, 346). The market is a social institution and, like any social institution, has to be circumscribed by rules and norms set by a government that is of the people, acts in name of the people, and is with the people.
Politics in a democracy should advance the interests of the people as a whole. That is not the same as saying that everything should be communally shared as we presume to be the case in prehistory. People living in sedentary, imagined communities recognize and accept inequality but only when they feel that they get a fair shake and benefit some from economic growth. Distrust in government is fueled by questions about what motivates decisions of political officeholders. When politicians fall to the rent-seeking, calculating behavior of private interests they can no longer serve as guardians of democracy.

Income inequality has always been, but it declined significantly in those thirty glorious years when, for the first time in history, the lower and middle classes could become the backbone of government in a democracy. The lower and middle classes became the large taxpaying portion of the population, because they shared in economic prosperity. It even got to the point that in the United States, Republicans and Democrats both seriously discussed the possibility of a basic income (Bregman 2016, 65-67). Since the 1970s the lower and middle classes have been gutted by those who believe, blindly, and uninformed by Adam Smith, in the free market. Politicians have been duped by those with economic power. And if not duped, they have been corrupted and prostituted themselves for personal gain. Those with economic power found a way since the early 1970s to advance their agenda of a deregulated market through which they could feed their own greed. They seek to find and exploit the weaknesses of politics in a democracy. Is it not ironical that democracy not only frees the people but also liberates business from the grip of absolutist politics? In pre-modern government political power almost always controlled economic power conform political economy and mercantilism. Under democracy economic power is much less constrained by political power and the risk is that the former will seek the latter and vice versa so that both can hold on to that power and wealth unless mechanisms are in
place that, on the one hand, prohibit egregious abuse of power and that, on the other, are enforced by decision makers not partial to one particular set of interests only.

Rent-seeking behavior is a major challenge in any democracy when calculable short-term outputs are far more appreciated and desired than longer-term outcomes. Systems scientist Safa Motesharrei and co-authors warn that in the case of what they call “economic stratification,” i.e., serious social-economic inequalities, “collapse is very difficult to avoid and requires major policy changed, including major reductions in inequality and population growth rates.” (2014, 101). Management scholar and co-author of the well-known 1972 *Limits to Growth* report of the Club of Rome, Jørgen Randers, observes that the capitalist economy and liberal democracy does not seem willing to invest in long-term advantages for society as it suffers from short-termism (2012). Whether it is true that liberal democracies are weaker governments than, say, that of China, remains to be seen. Meanwhile, applying so-called business principles of “good management” to the public sector since the 1980s, best known as New Public Management, severely undermines that public decisions should be legitimized on the basis of democratic and economic values both, i.e. on judgments about fairness, due process, and equity as well as about cost-benefit and means-ends considerations. This is not a simple matter to achieve in a societal culture that commodifies not just material goods but also seeks to make more immaterial benefits calculable. The welfare state of the thirty glorious years has given way to the competition state. In the words of the British political scientist Philip Cerny:

Rather than attempt to take certain economic activities out of the market, to ‘decommodify’ them as the welfare state was organized to do, the competition state has pursued increased marketization in order to make economic activities located within the
national territory, or which otherwise contribute to national wealth, more competitive in
international and transnational terms. (Cerny 1997, 259; emphasis PC)

In the competition state (see also Jessop 2002, 96), the state reduces itself to being the
handmaiden of business, to the point that at times of economic distress the state is expected to
help and bail businesses out and not to speak up when top managers still receive exorbitant
increases of salary and compensation packages. What a disgrace that it has been possible, at least
in the United States, that private businesses have been able to privatize profit and socialize risk!
When median salaries of the laboring and middle classes have stagnated in the past forty years it
is no wonder that people have come to distrust those with economic power. The social capitalism
of the thirty glorious years is challenged, to put it mildly, by the shift from managerial to
shareholder power, from focusing on short-term gains rather than on long-term results (the latter
was the secret of the Protestant Ethic), and from declining informal trust as a function of
decaying face-to-face communication (Sennett 2006, 37, 39, 42).

6. The Need for Continuous Civic Education

The blame-game for political polarization and partisanship is not productive because it operates
upon stereotypes. More importantly, there is no point in finding scapegoats in general or, more
specifically, determining who is to blame most: the citizen, the politician, the career civil servant,
or the corporate CEO. Everyone is doing exactly what is possible respectively allowed. Citizens
do not care too much to hear about duties, but do expect government and its officials to do their
duty. Businesses can only be expected to widen their market interest by seeking to influence
public regulations. Political officeholders can only be expected to seek private donations when
there are no regulations that prohibit such. Civil servants will not express reservations about intended policies when they find that the political leadership may not wish to hear these and will not accept objections. The one and only thing that can make a difference for all types of public actor is education.

The people as the citizenry not only has rights that are enforced on their behalf, it has duties it must fulfill as individual citizen and as a collective. The question of the day in many Western democracies is this: Have we elevated the notion of “right” to the realm of absolutes while relegating the countervailing notion of “responsibility” to the realm of relativism, which means they are easily fungible? Citizens are not subjects of rule, they are – through their representatives in the indirect representative democracies of today – makers and allies of rule. British sociologist Nikolas Rose says it thus:

To rule citizens democratically means ruling them through their freedom, their choices, and their solidarities rather than despite these. It means turning subjects, their motivations and interrelations, from potential sites of resistance to rule into allies of rule. (1996, 117)

This is not easy to assure, though, in an age that there appears to be less and less civics education in secondary schools, and more emphasis on citizen rights than on citizen duties. In fact, it would be useful for citizens in general to develop a more nuanced understanding of the role and position of government in society: government in democratic societies is not “over us” as if people are subjects, it is part of the people in their role as citizens. Government and its bureaucracy are indispensable to the survival of democracy (Suleiman 2003, 35), but what citizens “see” is a politics and democracy that is “for sale.” They see a public sector where
elected, political officeholders appear as if beholden to business interests and/or to the causes of various interest groups. That trust in government is declining is clear, and whatever the reasons may be, part of it is that in some political systems more than in others politics seems to have succumbed to the private sector, especially when public laws are enacted to serve private parties and interests. Mind you, private parties are not only businesses and those hired to lobby on their behalf, they also include political parties (indeed, they are not part of the public sector!) and any single-issue interest group or multi-issue charter organization.

That education in civics should go beyond the 1950s -1970s civics class of “Government 101” that introduces 12- to 18-year olds to the structure of government (the three branches) and how a bill becomes a law. It actually should focus, no modesty here, on the kind of issues addressed in this paper. It is upon that kind of a foundation that young people can opt for a career in the public sector that is based on calling and a desire to do good for the next generation. Fortunately, I have met plenty of students who have that kind of calling despite all the negativity, polarization, and cynicism that surrounds them. We need, though, to give them the knowledge about government and the instruments to help them navigate it as well as provide a deeper understanding of government as a key and indispensable function in any democratic system. Teachers, professors, need to display genuine enthusiasm, insatiable curiosity, and hold on to idealism in the midst of a society that seems to breed growing mistrust and cynicism.

7. Democracy and Bureaucracy: The Delicate Interplay of Fairness and Efficiency

In physical communities, people deal with each other directly and in such a way that the more base, even animal-type, behaviors are to some degree constrained by the group because without such constraints the group would not survive. In imagined communities this is far more difficult,
because people no longer know each other to the point that they know whom they can trust and rely upon. And so there is a government to help constrain the instincts and inclinations of individual human beings. The social psychologist Donald T. Campbell observed that society can survive when people develop the means to curb greed, pride, dishonesty, cowardice, lust, wrath, gluttony, envy, thievery, promiscuity, stubbornness, disobedience, and blasphemy. That is quite a list and evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers added gossip, backbiting, and scolding (both referenced in Edgerton 1992, 70). Sociologist and anthropologist Robert Edgerton noted that people tend to accept correlated events as causally linked, that they are predisposed to suspect the worst of others, and that they project their hostility to others. He concluded that people’s efforts to find ways to master those base instincts have never been more than partial because people are vessels of quite contradictory characteristics: they can be altruistic but also selfish, cooperate but also compete, be inquisitive about the unknown and yet fear it, be self-assertive and yet submissive (Edgerton 1992, 72-73). Human beings are a cauldron of contradictions.

People are also pattern-seekers and simplifiers who tend to think in terms of dichotomies rather than complementarities. They contrast a normative and communal stand from a more rationalistic, individualistic outlook (Wilson 1993). They contrast mechanistic societies and organizations with those that are perceived as more organic (cf. Ferdinand Tönnies). They discuss democracy as something that is threatened by bureaucracy (cf. Max Weber). They might also think that democracy is threatened by efficiency and vice versa. They contrast overbearing government regulation with the liberating deregulation that allows for a free market. In light of what was written above about stereotypes people have of each other’s public roles, it must be clear that they also tend to diminish a complex organizational and social reality by stereotyping. In reality, we will not only find a balancing mix of those contrasts, but must understand we
actually need it and recognize that sometimes the balance may tilt a bit to one side, other times to another, but should never decisively tilt toward one end only. With this unquestioned belief in performance management and New Public Management, we have for a while teetered dangerously on one side of that balancing act.

The challenge for democracy is that in the large-scale imagined communities of today it is actually quite possible that those in power are able to hide their true intentions, where those elected to public office and those with lots of money can work together to manipulate the common folk and subvert what the idea of a true democracy embodies: talking under the condition of respect for differences, listening, hearing, weighing, and coming to some sort of agreement. In a democracy people negotiate decisions and policies knowing that they can change them when environmental circumstances so require. In a democracy people can and should consult different sources of knowledge, not preferring one source over all others. In a democracy, an educated citizenry, whether they are garbage collectors and street maintenance personnel, elementary school teachers or professors, high-level CEOs or low level workers, can talk policy, especially those policies that affect their own lives and that of their children.

If that works then, indeed, democracy is the scariest of political systems that humanity has ever devised. It is scary because it challenges that historical pattern of power always flowing to the center and the few. It is scary to those in power because their ability to manipulate the multitude is constrained. Democracy is scary to the people, because now they are no longer regarded as sheep, but invited and expected to take ownership of government and recognize that basic human rights come with duties of participative, engaged, and – when and where possible – informed citizenship. It is scary because it has never really existed except to some degree during those glorious thirty years.
What experience can we fall back upon? Those who ignited the American and French Revolutions had no clue of the ripples it would send through the world. They were as blind as we are today, but we now know that some degree of balance between hope and cynicism has been possible. Lust for political and economic power will always be, as will the greed with which those in power seek to have more and/or hold on to it. People will always attempt to hoard political and economic power … but only when not just given free rein to do so, but also when they are allowed to get away with it. My call is not for a bloody revolution or for political regime change, it is for a quiet but persistent evolution toward informed democracy.

8. **Democracy, Self-Restraint, and True Guardians**

What government is can be answered by using three metaphors used by political scientist and economist Scott Page (2017, 138-143). We can think of government as an iceberg, where we only see the top and where the rest is less known or not at all visible to the population at large. It seems to me that this is how a lot of people think about government. Or we can see government as a structure of various institutional arrangements that deal with collective challenges that are beyond the interest and/or capacity of private and nonprofit actors. This is how civics used to be taught in most Western countries. In relation to this, for a while at least, citizens were also told that contemporary policy making is too technical for them and should be left to the elected and appointed professionals. Finally, we can think of government as a cloud within which many different institutional and individual actors operate from all three major groups of actors in society: public, private, and nonprofit. The metaphor of cloud is probably the one that fits best the content of this paper. Government is constantly shape-shifting in response to developments in the social, natural, geographical, cultural, political, and economic environments. Teaching civics
should really be teaching about government's position and role in society, and then preferably about its position and role over time.

The answer to what government is lies in knowing about what it has been and in what it has shown it could be – however briefly. What it has been is, obviously, subject to interpretation, and what it is and can be is even more subject to interpretation. Parts of an answer, for the moment anyway, and certainly not an ultimate answer, to such an ontological question cannot be but drawn from a wide range of authors, and thus a wide range of ideas, suggestions, analyses, insights, emerging yet unclear thoughts, and expectations. In my effort of trying to understand humanity’s creation of, engagement with, and desire for governance as expressed through that formal, institutional arrangement we call government, I cannot but conclude that how we govern ourselves is determined, on the one hand, by our instinctual need for survival and sociality, and, on the other, by our modern belief in rationality and intentionality. In the effort of understanding governance and governing, I have read widely but cannot claim, in all good conscience, to know better or more than all those scholars and social commentators who have contributed to our knowledge about and understanding of the position and role of government in society. Frankly, there are so many and varying ideas, thoughts, insights, descriptions and prescriptions from many authors that one might well question whether it is possible to write this in a book-length study. And, yet, I did.

Why? The answer may become clear to me in the years to come, but, frankly, I doubt it. We are pattern seekers in a world that actually defies our desires for algorithmic regularities. If anything, randomness is more common to human life than people care to admit: “…when you’re talking about individual outcomes, there’s a lot of randomness […] people don’t like that answer, and so they keep wanting a different answer. They say nature abhors a vacuum. Humans
abhor randomness. We like deterministic stories.” (Duncan Watts as interviewed by Wong, 2018; see also Salganik et al. 2006).

In light of all that randomness, it will be difficult to claim the ability of seeing where humanity is heading, let alone to tell you why. A scholar can only surmise trends on the basis of what has been, and then only very reluctantly suggest what avenues ahead there might be. Having said that, there are at a very abstract and general level some patterns discernable. Where humans can and feel the need, they will structure government territorially and organizationally. Human decision and policy making is as much influenced by instinctual and learned instinctual behaviors as it is by intent and evidence-based information. Democracy is the only political regime type that allows for negotiable authority and multi-source decision making. Democracy thrives when human beings substitute the temptation of short-term, individual gains with the promise of long-term, collective benefits.

Large-scale democracy is a very unusual institutional arrangement, since for most of history it did not exist and governments were controlled by the few. Democracy establishes some degree of participation by the people. The iron law of oligarchy, which not only pertains to political parties but, certainly in recent decades, also to the confluence of political and economic power, cannot be escaped, but we have seen it can be contained. However, it can only be contained when law and regulation are not controlled by private interests, where political officeholders do not prostitute their vote for money, where businessmen and women are limited in their rent-seeking operations and are willing to forego satisfying short-term desires and individual rents for longer-term welfare and collective rents, and where citizens not only recognize but accept the responsibility and duties that comes with being a citizen. In other words, large-scale democracy can only exist when all actors, institutional and individual, restrain their
own freedom so that the other can be free. This is ultimately the message of the Sermon on the Mount ("do not do unto others ..."), of John Stuart Mill’s alleged remark that “my freedom to punch you stops at your nose,” and of Nina Simone’s observation that freedom is to have no fear. In that kind of democracy all people, whatever their station and occupation in life, serve as true guardians of the government that they need to survive and thrive. We cannot do without democracy and government in our imagined communities, so we might as well share the burden and tend its garden.
References


